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Author(s): Donald M. Scott

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# The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America

Donald M. Scott

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The Lyceum is the American Theatre. It is the one institution in which we take our nose out of the hands of our English prototypes—the English whom we are always ridiculing and always following—and go alone. The consequence is, that it is a great success. It has founded a new profession.

*Putnam's Monthly*, March 1857

Americans of the mid-nineteenth century were untiring inventors of cultural and educational institutions. Among the most ubiquitous and important of the agencies they devised to satisfy their seemingly insatiable craving for "useful knowledge" was the public lecture, a form of instruction distinguished from the sermon, speech, and oration as well as from the treatise or essay, though it borrowed from them all. It would be difficult to exaggerate the scale and scope of public lecturing. In New York City there were more than 3,000 advertised lectures between 1840 and 1860, and in 1846 the citizens of Boston could choose from twenty-six different "courses" of lectures. But the lecture was not simply a phenomenon of the large cities. By the early 1840s there probably were between 3,500 and 4,000 communities that contained a society sponsoring public lectures.<sup>1</sup> A lecture society was frequently among the first institutions established in a newly formed town. Davenport, Iowa, organized its first lyceum in 1839, for example, just three years after it had been plotted and the same year that it received its charter, held its first elections, and reached a population of about 250.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, by the mid-1840s few northern towns of 1,000 or more people lacked at least one association sponsoring lectures. Moreover, the podium was encyclopedic in its range. Among other topics, the

Donald M. Scott is associate professor of history at North Carolina State University. The author is indebted to the Shelby Cullom Davis Center and the American Antiquarian Society for their support of this study.

<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Greef, "Public Lectures in New York, 1851-1878: A Cultural Index of the Times" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1941), 4-7.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph S. Schick, *The Early Theatre in Eastern Iowa: Cultural Beginnings and the Rise of the Theater in Davenport and Eastern Iowa, 1836-1863* (Chicago, 1939), 7-9.

lyceum in Belfast, Maine, in 1851–1852 sponsored lectures on astronomy, biology and physiology, the principles of geology, conversation, reading, the cultivation of memory, popular delusions concerning the Middle Ages, Iceland, the equality of the human condition, the true mission of women, the domestic life of the Turks, the problem of the age, and the origin of letters<sup>3</sup>

What can be designated as public lectures began to emerge in the 1830s. The lecture had been a common form for "the diffusion of knowledge" well before the 1830s. For the most part, however, lectures had been delivered before exclusive or specialized audiences: to a literary and philosophical society, composed of elected members, or to a benevolent association, such as a mission society, which was devoted to a particular activity. By the early 1830s a more broadly aimed kind of lecture developed. It was usually sponsored by the town lyceum, which directed its efforts to the entire community and which anyone could join by paying an annual fee. In addition, groups like young men's associations, library societies, and mechanics institutes began to sponsor lectures of general interest, open to those who were not formal members of the group. These lectures were usually free, and the lecturers were not paid for their efforts. The lecturers were usually local or regional figures, who frequently belonged to the local lyceum or sponsoring association.

It was not until the mid-1840s that what came to be clearly identified as the institution of the "public" or "popular" lecture emerged in its full form.<sup>4</sup> It clearly evolved out of the local, mutual-improvement, and amateur forms and was related to the reform, health, and itinerant lectures which were also a prominent feature of the cultural life of the 1840s and 1850s. Nonetheless, the full-blown lecture system differed from these forms in several important ways. It relied less on local figures, turning instead to men (and a few women) with regional or national reputations as lecturers. For example, from 1831 to 1838 the lyceum in Salem, Massachusetts, drew 87 of 118 lecturers (75 percent) from Salem itself and only rarely went beyond Boston for a lecturer. But by 1845 a citizen of Salem gave only one in ten of the lyceum's lectures, and almost half the lecturers came from outside Massachusetts. In addition, an admission fee of one or two dollars for a course and twelve and one-half or twenty-five cents for a single lecture was now charged even to members of the sponsoring society. The lecturers themselves were paid for their

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Hinds, "The Lyceum Movement in Maine" (M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1949), 77–78.

<sup>4</sup> Late-nineteenth-century memorialists of the system as well as most modern scholars have divided the lyceum movement into three stages. First, the local phase ran from 1826, the date of Josiah Holbrook's initial town lyceum, to about 1845. The second phase, lasting until just after the Civil War, constituted the "public lecture system," still organized around the local lyceums and young men's associations but depending heavily on paid lecturers of national reputation. The third phase, lasting until the 1880s, was marked by the disappearance of the local societies and the emergence of highly paid celebrities, commanding fees of \$1,000 or more, on tours conducted by a booking agency like the Redpath Lyceum Bureau. See Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York, 1956), vii–viii; David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West: The Ohio Lyceum, 1850–1870* (East Lansing, 1951), 177–238; Greef, "Public Lectures in New York," 1–9; and Edward E. Hale, "Lectures and Lecturers," in *Modern Eloquence*, ed. Thomas B. Reed (15 vols., Philadelphia, 1900), IV, xv–xxviii.

performances<sup>5</sup> By the early 1850s, local and lesser-known figures commanded from fifteen to twenty-five dollars plus expenses, while the most noted received between fifty and one hundred dollars (One leading lecturer supposedly stated that he lectured for "F.A.M.E. . . Fifty And My Expenses")<sup>6</sup>

Most important, however, the lecture had become more markedly a public occasion. Although no official body conducted public lectures, the groups that sponsored them acted as quasi-civil institutions<sup>7</sup> When a lyceum organized a course of lectures for the town, it acted, in a sense, for "the public," in effect, in its name. The rules governing access to the forum as well as form and substance signalled the lecture's character as a public event. Lecturing was solely by invitation. This clearly distinguished the true public lecture from one delivered by an itinerant who spoke without formal sponsorship by hiring a hall and buying an advertisement (usually located among the ads for patent medicines and far more elaborate and extravagant in its claims than the printed announcement of a sponsored lecture) Carefully solicited from one whom the lecture committee thought possessed useful knowledge, a lecture was thus a disinterested act which (whatever benefits of F.A.M.E. the performance might bring) was directed to the good of the audience and society<sup>8</sup> A lecture was expected to be serious and moral "in its tendency," though wit could certainly be used and immorality discussed Most important, it was expected to incorporate the public, to embrace all members of the community, whatever their occupation, social standing, or political and religious affiliation Useful to all and offensive to none, the lecture was an oratorical form deliberately and carefully separated from all partisan and sectarian discourse Finally, the lecture was delivered in at least neutral if not clearly designated public space, usually the town hall or another auditorium of sufficient size to accommodate all who might wish to attend.<sup>9</sup>

The fanfare that surrounded the lecture also heralded and reinforced its public character In October or early November of each year—at the beginning

<sup>5</sup> These figures are based on information in H. K. Oliver, *Historical Sketch of the Salem Lyceum* (Salem, 1878) See also Robert Carl Martin, "The Early Lyceum Movement, 1826-1845" (Ph D diss., Northwestern University, 1953), 247-50, Richard L. Weaver II, "Forum for Ideas: The Lyceum Movement in Michigan, 1818-1860" (Ph D diss., Indiana University, 1969), 185-229, and Hubert H. Hoeltje, "Notes on the History of Lecturing in Iowa, 1855-1885," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXV (Jan. 1927), 62-131

<sup>6</sup> Edward Everett Hale, *James Russell Lowell and His Friends* (Boston, 1899), 107

<sup>7</sup> The nature of the several kinds of "voluntary associations" in the mid-nineteenth century and their relation to public life are complex problems See Rowland Berthoff, *An Unsettled People: Social Order and Disorder in American History* (New York, 1971), 254-74, and Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia, 1978), 95-111

<sup>8</sup> Public discourse was believed to need protection less from honest error than from partisanship and charlatanism, situations in which a speaker distorted knowledge for party purposes or dishonest ends On the problem of the confidence man, see Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston, 1973), 207-31 On the emergence of canons of objectivity in public spokesman-ship, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York, 1978), 3-11

<sup>9</sup> Churches were sometimes used, but only in ways that disassociated the occasion from any sectarian taint *Annual Report of the Young Men's Association of Albany, New York* (Albany, 1848), 6-9, Henry Ward Beecher, *Eyes and Ears* (Boston, 1862), 102-08

of what was widely referred to as the lecture season (which ran until early April)—an article would appear in the local newspaper announcing and extolling both the system as a whole and the particular course that the local society had organized. (A course sometimes referred to a series of lectures given by the same person and devoted to one fairly broad topic, but it usually referred to the series of ten or twelve lectures, covering a broad range of wholly unrelated topics, given each week by a different person. Societies sometimes sponsored more than one course during a single season.) A special announcement—usually in boldface, set off by heavy borders, and accompanied by a plug for the particular lecturer and subject—ordinarily preceded each lecture, and the lecture was then reported in the next issue of the paper as a newsworthy event.<sup>10</sup>

A wide variety of people delivered public lectures at some time in their lives. A few lecturers were men of affairs who lectured out of older traditions of intellectual leadership and public guardianship.<sup>11</sup> Lawyers and physicians were invariably to be found among the battery of local speakers, and some of the more prominent regional and national orators had had some involvement with law or medicine. Clergymen and presidents or professors in colleges and seminaries probably comprised more than half of all public lecturers.<sup>12</sup> Finally, there were journalists, publicists, reformers, and literateurs—people located in newly invented positions based upon some form of conscious intellectual production. From this rank came those like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Orson Fowler, Horace Greeley, Park Godwin, Wendell Phillips, Bayard Taylor, Sylvester Graham, and William Alcott, who were among the most popular and highly paid lecturers.<sup>13</sup>

Lecturers thus, in nineteenth-century usage, made up a highly “miscellaneous” group. But, for the most part, the members of this corps of public lecturers did have some things in common. Probably almost all came to the forum with some oratorical experience, some confidence in their ability to perform orally. Many of them had gone to college where they had studied oratory and were likely to have belonged to a debating society or to have declaimed at college exercises. Law and the clergy, of course, were professions with firm oratorical traditions. In addition, many of the lyceums and young men’s societies provided opportunities for training and practice in addressing audiences.<sup>14</sup> But most important, with the exception of some in the first category, they

<sup>10</sup> This description is based on research in the *Cincinnati Gazette*, *Boston Herald*, and *New York Tribune*, 1850–1860, and the *Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, Mass.), 1835–1860.

<sup>11</sup> This paragraph is based on analysis of lectures recorded in the *Hampshire Gazette*, 1835–1860, Minutes of the Northampton Young Men’s Institute (Forbes Library, Northampton, Mass.), lists of available lecturers in *New York Daily Tribune*, Sept. 20, 1854, p. 4, *ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1855, p. 4, *ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1858, p. 5, *ibid.*, Sept. 9, 1859, p. 3, Petersham, Massachusetts, Lyceum Record Book (American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.), Minutes of the Worcester Lyceum, 1829–1856, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See Greef, “Public Lectures in New York,” Bode, *American Lyceum*, and J. G. Holland, “The Popular Lecture,” *Atlantic Monthly*, XV (March 1865), 369–70.

<sup>13</sup> For a list of forty-seven lecturers suggested by members, see Minutes of the Northampton Young Men’s Institute, May 11, 1855. Of the ten the committee selected to invite, the first six were situated in newly devised positions.

<sup>14</sup> Especially in the early years, sponsoring lectures was only one of several activities undertaken by such societies. Debates in which participation was rotated among the members were common.

were all engaged in some form of professional or intellectual career.<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, public lecturing can be seen as an act in the construction and conduct of particular kinds of careers.

Those who sought professional or intellectual careers in mid-nineteenth-century America faced a chaotic, confusing, and frequently unpredictable occupational life. Few whose adulthoods spanned these decades had careers that followed a course that they could have either planned or predicted. They frequently made their way by moving into and through a series of institutions, places, and activities that had not even existed when they started out and that they themselves often had to invent.<sup>16</sup> The coherence and organization that had marked most trades and professions in the eighteenth century had eroded, and the rationalized and bureaucratic professional structures of the last decades of the nineteenth century had not yet emerged. Their problem was not that of selecting and gaining access to a position or profession that would give them a predictable purchase on mobility, prosperity, and status. It was how to create or improvise a career. Professions and occupations were less structures providing a clear sequence of steps upward to greater rewards and prestige than instruments to be used only so long as they seemed to bring tangible progress and to be abandoned if they proved troublesome or if a more attractive opportunity presented itself. Thus, what gave direction to many intellectual and professional careers was not occupancy of a particular office or allegiance to a particular profession. Rather, coherence came from an underlying commitment to use the possession of knowledge (rather than commerce or the mastery of a skill) as the tool for achieving a broad though difficult-to-measure goal of "rise," "betterment," "fame," or "success."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, many career seekers shifted around in a manner hard to imagine for either the eighteenth or the twentieth centuries, as they tried to get "a hold" on life, to use the phrase of Lucien Boynton. In his own efforts, Boynton went from the clergy through school teaching and superintending an academy on to law as he moved from Amoskeag, New Hampshire, to Newark, Delaware, on to three successive

For detailed records of these debates, see Minute Books of Albany's Young Men's Association, 1835–1880 (Albany Public Library, Albany, N Y ), Minute Books of Marlborough, Massachusetts, Young Men's Lyceum, 1838–1842, Felton Family Papers (American Antiquarian Society), and Minute Books of Petersham, Massachusetts, Lyceum, 1833–1848, *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> A distinction is made here to indicate the relative absence of intellectual careers based upon clearly delineated and organized disciplines. For a highly pertinent discussion of the structure of intellectual life in antebellum America, see Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana, 1977)

<sup>16</sup> David F. Allmendinger, Jr., *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York, 1975), 7–42, Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York, 1977), 11–61. The biographies of many prominent intellectual figures—e.g., Asa Gray, Ormsby Mitchell, Horace Mann, Horace Greeley, Mark Hopkins—indicate the fluidity of intellectual careers. See also the biographical directories of colleges and seminaries, such as *General Catalogue of the Theological Seminary, Andover, Massachusetts, 1808–1908* (Andover, 1909), and William L. Montague, ed., *Biographical Record of the Alumni of Amherst College, during Its First Fifty Years* (Amherst, 1883)

<sup>17</sup> See Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York, 1976), 1–44, 80–128, Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 144–72, John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago, 1965), 39–98

places in Virginia, back to Worcester, and then to Uxbridge, Massachusetts, before finally—fourteen years later—settling in Springfield, Illinois<sup>18</sup>

Getting a hold on a career can be construed, in part, as a problem of audience and public.<sup>19</sup> The dimensions of the problem varied according to particular circumstances, but those seeking professional and intellectual careers nonetheless had a common need to secure or even create the audience necessary to sustain them. The problem had several dimensions. First, in the 1830s and 1840s there appears to have been a glut of young men trying to forge such careers. In comparison to earlier periods, and in relation to the population, more people than ever before were trying to establish legal, medical, and clerical careers, and the cities contained crowds of young men trying to figure out how to get a hold on some kind of intellectual life.<sup>20</sup> Overcrowding was a lament common to lawyers, physicians, and ministers; and those in the demimonde of urban intellectual and literary life inhabited an intensely competitive jungle<sup>21</sup> Thus most of these career seekers had to vie for support among populations that seemed able or willing to sustain the careers of only a limited number of those trying to gain their patronage<sup>22</sup> Second, there was the need to overcome the anonymity that resulted from the extraordinary—often continual—movement both of the career seekers and of many of the people in the towns where they tried to make their way. Though probably few people entered a community as total strangers, it was often difficult to gain access to the informal networks and institutions necessary for getting a hold. There was also the problem of structure—or the lack of it. With the partial exception of science and theology, there were few if any clearly bounded “communities of the competent” to which one directed intellectual production and which certified its standing as knowledge and meted out position and prestige. Indeed, it often was not at all clear what the relevant audience was or where it was situated<sup>23</sup> In effect, then, an intellectual or professional career almost of necessity was at least partly

<sup>18</sup> Solon J. Buck, ed., “Selections from the Journal of Lucien C. Boynton, 1835–1853,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, n.s. 43 (Oct. 1933), 329–80.

<sup>19</sup> See T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London, 1973), 10–13, and Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 190–267.

<sup>20</sup> Bailey B. Burritt, *Professional Distribution of College and University Graduates* (Washington, 1912), 62–114; Allmendinger, *Paupers and Scholars*, 1–22; and Daniel H. Calhoun, *Professional Lives in America: Structure and Aspiration, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1965).

<sup>21</sup> Calhoun, *Professional Lives in America*, 88–197; Scott, *From Office to Profession*, 52–75, 112–32; Lawrence M. Friedman, *A History of American Law* (New York, 1973), 264–92. Also useful is Gerard W. Gawalt, “Sources of Anti-Lawyer Sentiment in Massachusetts, 1740–1840,” *American Journal of Legal History*, 14 (Oct. 1970), 283–307. For one of the few studies that tries to examine the intellectual low life of mid-nineteenth century America, see Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York, 1956). See also Merle M. Hoover, *Park Benjamin: Poet and Editor* (New York, 1948) and Cortland P. Auser, *Nathaniel P. Willis* (New York, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> For the difficulties of two young lawyers in penetrating Worcester’s legal community, see Buck, “Selections from the Journal of Lucien C. Boynton,” 360–80, and *Diary of Christopher Columbus Baldwin, Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, 1829–1835*, ed. Nathaniel Paine, *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*, VIII (Worcester, 1901).

<sup>23</sup> For a good discussion of this problem, see Haskell, *Emergence of Professional Social Science*, 1–23, 48–91.

oriented toward an indeterminate, diffuse, and miscellaneous audience. In mid-nineteenth-century language, the problem was how "to come before the public" and "make a mark," how to secure support or clients from an immediate audience as well as gain the attention of a broader, unknown public beyond.

These conditions gave public lecturing its significance as an act in the construction of a professional or intellectual career. Essentially, a public lecture was a rather complex form of display. It demonstrated specific intellectual character: a lecture not only diffused knowledge which the speaker was thought to be especially qualified to convey but was also expected to be "original" (not necessarily *new*—Phillips gave his "The Lost Arts" more than one thousand times), the product of one's own inquiry and intellection.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, a lecture presented a somewhat broader intellectual persona: no matter how specific the topic, a lecture was expected to be broad and expansive in its implications rather than pedantic or esoteric. Thus a public lecture signaled the possession of wisdom, general learning, or, in Emerson's highly resonant formulation, "man thinking."<sup>25</sup> Finally, because it was an act in the public good, it displayed civic character or "a love of usefulness." In all these ways, then, delivery of a lecture was a statement that both announced and certified one's character and standing as a legitimate public lecturer, in much the same way that having a painting selected by a jury for a public show can be said to change someone who paints into an artist.

This kind of advertisement or display could help a professional or intellectual career in a number of ways. Although sponsored lecturing could in no sense solicit clients directly (for the "itinerants" a lecture frequently did just that), there were ways in which the lecture could help secure an immediate professional audience.<sup>26</sup> A physician's lecture on botany or geology signaled him as a man of science, whom one might be inclined to trust with one's health, and an attorney's lecture on moral character might suggest that he possessed qualities one desired in the person to whom he trusted his affairs. And at a time when pastoral survival was difficult indeed, a clergyman's lecture on "True Success" could firm up his support among his parishioners. It displayed him as a counselor of the young and marked him as a public figure in the town, the type of minister some congregations took pride in having as their pastor.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Theodore C. Pease states that Wendell Phillips was asked to deliver the lecture "over two thousand times," Wendell Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*, 2d series, ed. Theodore C. Pease (Boston, 1891), 365.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion was echoed by many other lecturers. See, for example, *Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, ed. F. Cobbe (15 vols., London, 1863–1879), VII, 217–56; Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*, 331–64; Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures and Orations*, ed. Newell Dwight Hillis (New York, 1913) 128–56; Thomas Starr King, *Substance and Show, and Other Lectures* (Boston, 1890) 148–90.

<sup>26</sup> An advertisement for the lectures of Prof. Ambler, an itinerant health lecturer, on electrical psychology stated that "Prof. Ambler and Dr. Gardner have taken rooms at the Mansion House, where they may be seen during the day from 9 to 1 and from 2 to 5." *Hampshire Gazette*, Dec. 12, 1849, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> For clerical-congregation ties, see Scott, *From Office to Profession*, 52–75, 112–33. For suggestions of one function served by local societies, see Arnold Thackery, "Natural Knowledge in



As an act bringing intellectual notice, a lecture could help expand a professional career into new areas. For the clergyman who wished to establish himself as a public spokesman rather than simply a denominational figure, serving a single congregation or acting as a doctrinal partisan, the public lecture provided a forum unmistakably outside sectarian boundaries. Amos Dean, a young Albany, New York, attorney, provides another example of the expansion of possibilities through lecturing. His lectures on education and phrenology before the Young Men's Association for Mutual Improvement helped him forge a career in the new field of medical jurisprudence.<sup>28</sup> In addition, as a gesture indicating that one stood ready to serve the public good, a lecture could help transform a professional career into a public one. Indeed, lawyers who went on to public careers were well represented not only among the founders and members of lyceums and young men's societies, but also among the lecturers. In 1838, in Springfield, Illinois, for example, a young lawyer with political aspirations named Abraham Lincoln gave a lecture to the Springfield Young Men's Lyceum in which he gave a nonpartisan analysis of the problems of democratic leadership and order revealed by an anti-abolitionist mob's murder of Elijah Lovejoy.<sup>29</sup>

The notice occasioned by public lecturing was not confined to the locality of the lecture. Lectures were news items, and local newspapers routinely picked up reports of lectures in other places. The *Hampshire Gazette* not only announced and faithfully reported the lectures sponsored by the Northampton, Massachusetts, Young Men's Association; it also noted lectures in contiguous towns, lectures given elsewhere by Northampton residents, and those given in large towns of the region like Springfield. In addition, it often printed reports and excerpts from lectures by stars like Henry Ward Beecher, Emerson, and Holmes taken from the metropolitan newspapers, particularly the *Boston Herald* and *New York Tribune*. In fact, the *Tribune* had a special section, entitled "Sketches of Lectures," which reported on lectures from the various courses in New York City. These reports, in turn, were often reprinted by newspapers all over the country. The weekly edition had by the 1850s a press run of almost 175,000, a large portion of which was distributed to other

Cultural Context. The Manchester Model," *American Historical Review*, 79 (June 1974), 672-709. The lyceum societies appear, however, to have differed in important ways from the Manchester model, even though what Thackeray calls decorative knowledge did play a part in their operations. For the nature and role of various kinds of societies, see also Steven A. Shapin, "The Pottery Philosophical Society, 1819-1835: An Examination of the Cultural Uses of Provincial Science," *Science Studies*, 2 (Oct. 1972), 311-36; Ronald Story, "Class and Culture in Boston: The Athenaeum, 1807-1860," *American Quarterly*, XXVII (May 1975), 178-99; Wallace Kenneth Schoenberg, "The Young Men's Association 1833-1876: The History of a Social-Cultural Organization" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1962); Newman Jeffrey, "The Detroit Young Men's Society," *Michigan History*, 43 (June 1959), 197-211, and Martin, "The Early Lyceum," 390-404.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Hand, *Historical Address at the Semi-Centennial Anniversary of the Young Men's Association* (Albany, 1884), 4-8; George Howell and Jonathan Tenny, *History of the County of Albany, N.Y., from 1609 to 1886* (New York, 1886), 143-44.

<sup>29</sup> *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (9 vols., New Brunswick, 1953-1955), I, 108-15.

newspapers and to the reading rooms of thousands of young men's associations, library societies, lyceums, and mechanics' institutes.<sup>30</sup> Finally, public lectures were themselves often published, either under the auspices of the sponsoring society or in collections of the most popular and useful efforts by prominent lecturers

Even though the public lecture was delivered to a particular local audience, it was an act that could reach the broader, but distant and anonymous, "public." Such notice could bring one to the attention of those seeking a pastor, editor, or professor. It was, for example, Beecher's "Lectures to Young Men," originally delivered to the Young Men's Lyceum in Indianapolis, Indiana, that brought him to the attention of Henry C. Bowen and others as a desirable candidate for the pastorate of the newly established Plymouth Street Church in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>31</sup> And it was on the basis of his "Lectures to Young Men on Chastity" that students of Lane Theological Seminary proposed Graham for the professorship of natural philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

For some people, lecturing became a major part of their intellectual careers, even though they remained in some other office or profession. Figures like Beecher, Theodore Parker, Holmes, Louis Agassiz, Benjamin Silliman, George William Curtis, Edward Starr King, and Josiah Holland continued to hold positions as ministers, professors, and editors. Nonetheless, for ten years or more most of them devoted almost four months of each year to lecturing. In the 1851–1852 season, for example, Holmes lectured in more than seventy different places between the last week of November and the first of April, in addition to giving regular medical lectures at Harvard.<sup>33</sup> In the 1854–1855 season, Taylor gave 128 lectures in towns ranging from Bangor to Baltimore and from Boston to Davenport.<sup>34</sup> There were also those like Park Benjamin, one-time lawyer, literary agent, editor, poet, and journalist, who announced in 1849 that he had "adopted the profession of lecturer and intended to devote his whole time and attention to that profession."<sup>35</sup> As a profession, public lecturing provided occupational identity and prestige, an income, and a public intellectual role. It gave the lecturer "an honorable place among the intellectual sovereigns of the land," for as one commentator put it, "the chief Lyceum lecturers are personally more widely known than any other class of public men in

<sup>30</sup> The role of the *New York Tribune* and other metropolitan dailies like the *New York Herald* and *Boston Herald* in the emergence of a national communications system was enormous. See Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities, 1790–1840* (Cambridge, 1973).

<sup>31</sup> William C. Beecher and Samuel Scoville, *A Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher* (New York, 1888), 199–224.

<sup>32</sup> *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822–1844*, ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (2 vols., New York, 1934), I, 83–85.

<sup>33</sup> Eleanor M. Tilton, *Amiable Aristocrat: A Biography of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes* (New York, 1947), 440–41.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Croom Beatty, *Bayard Taylor: Laureate of the Gilded Age* (Norman, 1936), 146–48.

<sup>35</sup> Park Benjamin to Alfred Street, Oct. 26, 1849, Park Benjamin Papers (Butler Library, Columbia University, New York).

the country."<sup>36</sup> They were also "well paid for their labors": Taylor, for example, earned more than \$6,000 in the 1854–1855 season, almost three times what was considered a top clerical salary.<sup>37</sup> And like the ministry, to which the "profession" of lecturer was commonly likened, it gave ample opportunity to express one's "love of usefulness." As Curtis explained, "When you reflect that every Lyceum lecturer in good practice speaks to fifty thousand persons, at least, during the season . . . the power of the system is evident enough."<sup>38</sup>

The emergence of the lecture system not only required lecturers, but audiences as well, people willing to organize and conduct a course and, most important, people willing to attend them. Attendance varied enormously, ranging from the twenty-five loyal lyceum members who went out on a stormy night to hear a local figure lecture on an uninteresting topic to the 1,500 to 3,000 who turned out for stars like Beecher, Taylor, or Greeley (When Beecher lectured in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1856, a special train, scheduled to arrive an hour and one-half before the lecture and return immediately afterwards, was put on so that people from Northampton, Hadley, and Chicopee could attend.)<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that by the late 1840s the public lecture reached an enormous public. Precise figures are impossible to attain, but by fairly conservative estimate attendance at public lectures in the North and West probably totalled close to 400,000 people a week at the peak in the 1850s.<sup>40</sup>

Why was there such an audience and what was its character? What evidence there is—statements by lecturers themselves and by other commentators, diaries, and minutes and membership lists of sponsoring societies—suggests a diverse audience made up of both men and women, ranging in age from the mid-teens through the late fifties or early sixties, and drawn from an occupational spectrum that included artisans, mechanics, farmers, lawyers, teachers, professors, doctors, clergymen, shopkeepers, and merchants, as well as people in a wide range of commercial and service trades.<sup>41</sup> The broad audience for the public lecture was not a simple reflection of the overall social structure, but was weighted toward certain identifiable groups. Public lectures were an institution of town and city, and although some rural folk came to town to at-

<sup>36</sup> "Lectures and Lecturing," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, XIV (Dec 1856), 124, "Editor's Easy Chair," *ibid.*, XXIV (Jan 1862), 267

<sup>37</sup> Beatty, *Bayard Taylor*, 148–49

<sup>38</sup> "Editor's Easy Chair," 267

<sup>39</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, Jan 15, 1856, p 2

<sup>40</sup> This is based upon an estimation that 2,000 lectures, with an average attendance of 200 people, took place each week during the season. See also Greef, "Public Lectures in New York," 4–11

<sup>41</sup> This description of the audience is based on the diaries of Samuel M. Burnside, Levi Lincoln Newton, Edward Jenner Carpenter, Brown Thurston, Catharine White Forbes, and Elisha Harkness (American Antiquarian Society), the membership lists of the Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, Mutual Improvement Society, Worcester Lyceum, Marlborough, Massachusetts, Young Men's Lyceum, Petersboro, Massachusetts, Lyceum, *ibid.*, the membership lists of the Albany Young Men's Association (Albany Public Library), and the membership lists of the Northampton Young Men's Institute (Forbes Library)

tend them, agriculture and the countryside were underrepresented. The lecture-going public was, moreover, overwhelmingly native-born. A small but highly visible group of leading citizens in their forties participated in the lecture culture in every town and often provided leadership for the sponsoring institution, but audiences were composed predominantly of people in their twenties and early thirties. Although apprentices, clerks, mechanics, and artisans were not necessarily lecture goers, they were well represented. Very few, if any, factory operatives participated in the institution, while almost all the young professionals in a town would be members of the sponsoring societies. The people who went to public lectures, it would appear, were aspiring and ambitious, personally, socially, or culturally. Most Americans coming of age in these decades led a somewhat dislocated existence, and many of them were forced to strike out on their own, with scant resources to begin with or fall back upon, few clear-cut institutions to guide them, and few unambiguous cues to follow. Life appeared to them less a matter of settling into an established niche than a process of continuing self-construction, as people had to decide how to begin, whether to move on in search of greater opportunities, when to seek out a situation with greater prospects or advantages, and, frequently, whether to go West and start afresh. The lecture-going public was thus made up of people who perceived themselves in motion, in a state of preparation or expectation.

What drew such people to public lectures? The answer lies partly in their attitudes toward knowledge and education, their desire for useful knowledge that would give them the hold on life that their aspirations seemed to require. Indeed, the need for education—the notion that knowledge was an essential tool for bending conditions to one's will—was a constant theme of all kinds of discourse.<sup>42</sup> But what education and what kind of knowledge was wanted? To the Americans who flocked to the public lecture, the answer was that almost all knowledge was potentially useful. Life possessed the quality of boundlessness, and there were few limits to what might constitute useful knowledge.<sup>43</sup> There was thus a kind of gluttony to the quest, a frenetic drive to accumulate as much as possible, to store it up and have it on hand for any contingency. There was always more and new knowledge to be had, and unforeseen situations that seemed to require knowledge one did not have. Lecture-going Americans not only wanted knowledge, they insisted that it be accessible to them. Knowledge was considered a public commodity, to be

<sup>42</sup> Lyceum societies routinely had an inaugural lecture extolling the power of education, and this was a continuing theme of lyceum lectures. See Samuel Burnside, "Inaugural Lecture to the Worcester Lyceum, Nov 11, 1831," Samuel Burnside Papers (American Antiquarian Society), Daniel D. Barnard, *An Introductory Address Delivered before the Young Men's Association for Mutual Improvement of the City of Albany, on the 7th January, 1834* (Albany, 1834), Amos Dean, *Introductory Lecture before the Young Men's Association for Mutual Improvement in the City of Albany, Delivered Dec 17, 1839* (Albany, 1839). The *American Journal of Education* (Boston, 1826–1830) and *American Annals of Education* (Boston, 1830–1839) continually stressed the role of lyceums in diffusing useful knowledge.

<sup>43</sup> John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848–1860* (Ann Arbor, 1969).

made available to all. Indeed, any attempt to cut off access to knowledge was considered not only a violation of democratic theory, but also a kind of personal injury, an obstacle blocking one's freedom to develop as she or he saw fit.<sup>44</sup> Since life was a process of individual self-creation, knowledge had to be organized and dispensed, less in rigid, prepackaged patterns than in ways that let people pick and choose what they wanted, when they wanted it.

The appeal of the lecture system partly lay in its ability to meet these intellectual needs through its comprehensiveness and flexibility. Its compass included all the basic categories of knowledge and an almost limitless range of topics. It also was responsive to new situations requiring particular knowledge as well as to the development of new knowledge. In fact, a course almost always included a few new topics: during the Hungarian Revolution, for example, the former ambassador to Hungary was in great demand, as was Charles Loring Brace, who had traveled in Hungary and went about lecturing on "Hungary: Its Fitness for Democracy."<sup>45</sup> Similarly, after the Seneca Falls Convention, the "woman question" became a frequent topic, one of the vehicles by which some women began to make their way onto the lecture platform.<sup>46</sup> And the Northampton Young Men's Institute's lecture committee, "determined to spare no pain to give the public a course of lectures from the first men in the country," tried to get a lecture from Dr. E. K. Kane immediately after his return from a much heralded Arctic expedition. (Northampton was not alone in its disappointment, as the committee explained: "The Dr. has declined more than 100 invitations to lecture in various parts of the country the present season.")<sup>47</sup>

The ability of the system to respond to demands for the newest kinds of knowledge was not the only source of its appeal. The manner in which it characteristically treated its subjects was equally enticing. Firm interest remained in what might be called curious knowledge—the exotic, bizarre, and wondrous. But audiences were not particularly interested in lectures that were simply descriptive or informative. Facts, it was constantly pointed out, were more readily available elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> Judging from what was most popular—i.e., those lectures people were most willing to pay to hear—audiences expected lecturers to place their particular topic or kind of knowledge in a broad, interpretive context. To be sure, the good lecture had to be thoroughly grounded in

<sup>44</sup> For the suspicion of institutions that seemed to withhold knowledge from the common people, see Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, 46–128; Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, 1957), 92–107.

<sup>45</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 17, 1852, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Women began to make their way onto the platform of the "public lecture" in the late 1850s. Before that they had appeared as speakers on some reform and abolition platforms, but by the Civil War lecturing had become one of the "professions" open to women. See Alice Stone Blackwell, *Lucy Stone: Pioneer of Woman's Rights* (Boston, 1930); Doris G. Yoakam, "Woman's Introduction to the American Platform," in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, ed. William Brigance (2 vols., New York, 1943), I, 153–89; and R. Laurence Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America," *American Quarterly*, XXVII (May 1975), 200–21.

<sup>47</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, Jan. 22, 1856, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Holland, "The Popular Lecture," 367.

something concrete, a lecture that simply strung together generalities was condemned as a superficial and ill-formed performance. Rather, it was the connection of the specific topic or theme with some "more comprehensive view" that rendered thought and knowledge ultimately useful, at once "practical" and "ennobling," to use terms frequently employed in praise of lectures. Thus, the good lecture was at once instructive and inspiring: it "elevated and enlarged the understanding and gave broader and more comprehensive views" of the self, the nation, the world, mankind, or nature.<sup>49</sup>

This interpretive imperative can be seen in almost any lecture, but is particularly evident in most popular lectures on science, travel, and that broad category which might be labeled "our times." Whatever the particular field (geology and astronomy were the most popular) a scientific lecture had science itself and the natural order as its implicit subjects.<sup>50</sup> The effective lecture was thoroughly grounded in concrete fact and usually accompanied by dramatic experiments or pictorial representations.<sup>51</sup> By such display as well as by the overall orchestration from the very particular and least grand specimen to the increasingly complex and encompassing ones, the lecturer created a sense of what George Daniels has called the wonders of science, both as an intellectual enterprise or adventure and as a reflection of "the power, wisdom, and skill of the creator, God."<sup>52</sup>

The travel lecture had much the same character.<sup>53</sup> Like the scientific lecture, it was grounded in curious fact—conveying esoteric knowledge about exotic and mysterious places. Just as the scientific lecturer came before the audience as an explorer seeking out the mysteries of nature and the universe, the travel lecturer appeared before the audience as an explorer of human nature and the world. The travel lecture was less a travelogue than a kind of comparative ethnography. First-hand experience and observation provided the lecturer with unique and original knowledge. But the lecture's purpose was to foster "broader and more comprehensive views of mankind" and, either implicitly or explicitly, deepen the audience's awareness of American custom and character. The essential genre can be seen most clearly in the lectures of Taylor, far and away the most popular and widely sought travel lecturer.<sup>54</sup> His travel lectures built upon a sense of exploration and authenticity. He did not travel as an ordinary tourist, but as a kind of participant-observer, making sure

<sup>49</sup> Bayard Taylor, "The Philosophy of Travel," *Hampshire Gazette*, Dec. 25, 1855, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., "Dr. Boynton's Lectures," *Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 12, 1856, p. 2, and Feb. 19, 1856, p. 2; Dr. Antisell, "Volcanos and Volcanic Forces," *New York Daily Tribune*, Jan. 21, 1853, p. 3; M. F. Maury, "The Sea and the Circulation of its Waters," *ibid.*, Jan. 13, 1853, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> For a revealing discussion of the expenditures of Silliman on his lecture materials, see Margaret Rossiter, "Benjamin Silliman and the Lowell Institute: The Popularization of Science in Nineteenth Century America," *New England Quarterly*, XLIV (Dec. 1971), 602–26.

<sup>52</sup> "Dr. Boynton's Lectures," *Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 19, 1856, p. 2. On the "wonders" of science, see George H. Daniels, *American Science in the Age of Jackson* (New York, 1968), 40–41.

<sup>53</sup> For a useful discussion of the conventions of travel writing, see Willard Thorp, "Pilgrims' Return," in *Literary History of the United States: History*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Henry Seidel Canby, and Willard Thorp (New York, 1963), 827–42.

<sup>54</sup> Beatty, *Bayard Taylor*, Marie Hansen-Taylor and Horace Scudder, eds., *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor* (2 vols., Boston, 1884).

to "assimilate himself with the habits of every people among whom he journeyed . . . [so as to] find much to admire and not a little to learn in whatever situation, or whatever country he chanced to be"<sup>55</sup> Armed with this authenticity, he sketched a portrait revealing what he thought to be the essential character of the country and its people His purpose, however, did not stop there His portraits of the authentic Arab or Eskimo were designed not only to expand his audience's understanding by broadening their view of the range of human character and custom in the world; they were also intended to foster through contrast a fuller appreciation of the nature and distinctiveness of American character In "Philosophy of Travel"—one of his more popular lectures—he made his rationale clear, and in "Animal Man" and "Man and Climate" he drew upon his wide travels to give his audience cautionary tales about some of the alarming tendencies he saw in contemporary American character and behavior<sup>56</sup>

The large category of lectures that sought to explicate life in contemporary America followed a comparable rhetorical strategy They focused upon something familiar and of obvious and immediate concern to a broad audience—an institution like "matrimony" or "money," a quality like "beauty" or "character," or a theme like "success" or "progress." Then, through a wide range of "apt illustrations" and "characterizations," drawn from life, literature, and history, they placed their particular topics in a broad and comprehensive view that both illuminated the present situation and reinforced a sense of the existence and applicability of commonly held moral precepts Benjamin's extremely popular "Age of Gold," an eight-hundred-line lecture in verse, provides a good example of the genre.<sup>57</sup> The title referred specifically to the California gold rush, as well as to the notion of America as a land of gold (It was also an ironic play on the idea of a golden age in the past ) Benjamin employed a wide variety of rhetorical devices, including eulogy, satire, and exhortation, and a staggering array of historical, literary, and topical allusions. The piece opened with a eulogy to Christopher Columbus, discoverer of the "land of gold," whose

deeds should brighten the Historic page,  
Inspire the poet, lend fresh charm to Art,  
And live immortal in a Nation's heart,

and continued with a richly allusioned excursion through the subsequent ages of discovery, learning, science, and invention<sup>58</sup> All of this—about one-third of the whole—served as prolegomena to Benjamin's depiction of the present as an

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, "Philosophy of Travel," 1 For notices and excerpts from Taylor's lecture on Japan, see *New York Tribune*, Jan 21, 1854, p 3, Nov 30, 1854, p 3, and Feb 1, 1856, p 3 For excerpts from "Arabs," see *New York Tribune*, Jan 20, 1854, p 3 and Nov 6, 1855, p 3 For excerpts from "India," see *New York Tribune*, Nov 7, 1859, p 3 and Jan 9, 1860, p 3

<sup>56</sup> Robert Warnock, "Unpublished Lectures of Bayard Taylor," *American Literature*, V (May 1933), 123-32

<sup>57</sup> For complete text of the poem, see *Poems of Park Benjamin*, ed Merle M Hoover (New York, 1948) The manuscript version is in Park Benjamin Papers

<sup>58</sup> Hoover, *Park Benjamin*, 168

Age of Progress, symbolized by the gold rush, the scope of which Benjamin compared to the Great Crusade and the barbarian invasion of Rome. Showing the rush to riches to be in large part a fool's errand, Benjamin moved into satirical commentary on the notion of America as a land of gold, describing how it often became a land of dross. He portrayed the immigrants' plight, drawn by the promise of glitter only to become "incessant workers, poorest of the poor," and the plight of the idle rich, "pampered pets of ease" who "in vacant sloth" give themselves over to "a sensuous life, unmindful of its end"<sup>59</sup> (Neither of these groups, of course, were likely to be heavily represented among Benjamin's audience.) Benjamin then went on to lampoon the press, the demagogic politician, the devotee of fashion. Finally, in his peroration, he invoked the present as superior to the past, potentially a real "age of gold"—not one built on a false quest for wealth and fashion but an age that awaited "him, who keeps his faith and thoughts unbought" and finds

In conscience clear, in duty, virtue bold,  
Here is his placer, now his Age of Gold<sup>60</sup>

The intellectual form and range of the public lecture system obviously helped fill the lecture halls. But the question remains why the lecture itself was such a popular form. After all, knowledge of the sort provided by the system was readily available in print, and the ideas and wisdom of most of the popular lecturers existed in printed form. The answer lies in the particular character of the lecture as a public ritual. The lecture was an intellectual event, but it was also a performance before a specific and live audience of "miscellaneous" composition.<sup>61</sup> Its character as performance was not only implicit in the form—it was clearly recognized as one of the lecture system's most important features. By the late 1840s, a public lecture was expected to entertain as well as instruct and inspire, and the newspaper reviews always assessed the quality of the performance as well as the substance of the message. Lecturers worked hard to polish their lectures and felt that a lecture could not really be an effective performance until it had been delivered at least a dozen times. Most people on the circuit worked up only one or two new lectures for each season, which they then gave most of that year, though they always kept a few from previous years in their repertoire in case a lecture committee requested them. Indeed, it was not uncommon for a town to ask that a particularly good lecture be repeated.<sup>62</sup>

In certain ways, all formal oratorical occasions possess the qualities of performance. In the 1840s and 1850s, however, the character of the lecture as a

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 171

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 174

<sup>61</sup> This notion of the lecture as a performance is informed by recent work on rhetorical performance and forms. See Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1 (Winter 1968), 1–14; Thomas B. Farrell, "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 62 (Feb. 1976), 1–14.

<sup>62</sup> Holland, "The Popular Lecture," 364–67; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The American Lecture-System," *MacMillan's Magazine*, XVIII (May 1868), 48–56; "Lectures and Lecturers," *Putnam's Monthly*, IX (March 1857), 317–21.



performance appears to have been particularly important. The appeal of the public lecture as a form of intellectual theatricality lay partly in how it dealt with some of the cultural tensions of the mid-nineteenth-century America. Within the "earnest feeling in behalf of the diffusion of knowledge" there was considerable ambivalence.<sup>63</sup> Americans professed great confidence in the capacity of the intellect and understanding to shape human destiny. As pundits of various kinds constantly intoned, theirs was an age of progress, and the mind, unfettered by archaic traditions and rigid formulations, was the ultimate source of progress. But at the same time there were real doubts whether the chaos and dynamism of the age was controllable, whether the mind really could absorb it all and find or create order. The craving for useful knowledge reflected the need for a sense of intellectual control, for what contemporaries called comprehensive views, a style of knowledge that brought a wide variety of disparate, curious, or troubling "facts" into contact with principles of moral and cosmic order.<sup>64</sup> It was not only by the scope of its courses but also by the individual lecture's character as a dramaturgical event that the lecture system provided its public with the comprehensive views it wanted. A popular lecture was, in effect, a performance of "man thinking," and it provided what Emerson called "heroic" thought, that which created order out of materials that did not appear to possess it. Audiences came away from a popular lecture with a sense that the lecturer had carried them to a state of "enlarged understanding," a mode of apprehension that went beyond mere empirical knowledge or sterile "system." As Josiah Holland put it:

Men wish for nothing more than to know how to classify their facts, what to do with them, how to govern them, and how far to be governed by them, and the man who takes the facts with which the popular life has come into contact and association, and draws from them their nutritive and motive power, and points out their relation to individual and universal good, and organizes around them the popular thought, and uses them to give direction to the popular life, and does all this with masterly skill, is the man whose houses are never large enough to contain those who throng to hear him. This is the popular lecturer, *par excellence*.<sup>65</sup>

The popular lecture not only provided people with the comprehensive vision they wanted; it did so in a form that embodied what was widely referred to as the "democratic spirit" of American society. As a public event, it appeared to make knowledge readily accessible to the common man. More important, it presented a quintessentially democratic form of knowledge, which gained its legitimacy from the people's sanction rather than by imposition. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson put it, "the American Lecture-system has this great result, that it furnishes a ready standard by which to try all prominent men."<sup>66</sup> In fact, the staunchest defenders of the lecture system portrayed it as the arena in which anyone who claimed the right to "instruct the people" had to test

<sup>63</sup> "Lectures and Lecturing," 122.

<sup>64</sup> See Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science*, 1-47; R. Jackson Wilson, *In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860-1920* (New York, 1968), 1-31.

<sup>65</sup> Holland, "The Popular Lecture," 367.

<sup>66</sup> Higginson, "American Lecture-System," 53.

that claim. The crucial standard, of course, was popularity, as "proved by the infallible test of the money-market"<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, the paying public seemed to control the system—lecturers who could not attract a large enough audience did not remain popular lecturers for very long, and societies that failed to provide a course of sufficient popularity also had trouble surviving. In fact, those lecture committees which tried to cut costs by using cheaper, relatively unknown, local talent often found themselves with such small audiences that they lost money.<sup>68</sup> To complete the cycle, the system of the late 1840s and 1850s depended upon a corps of lecturers with enough popularity to command the fees that made lecturing financially worthwhile. Lecturing for a fee appears, in fact, to have operated as a subtle way of signifying quality. When Benjamin announced that he was making lecturing his profession, it was a clear gesture indicating that there would be nothing half-hearted or amateurish about his efforts. Henceforth, he stated, lecturing would be the source of his livelihood, the intellectual activity to which he intended to "devote his whole time and attention."<sup>69</sup> As one commentator reported, "in an average New England town, people will not go to a lecture if they think the lecturer has 'given' his service. The public thinks that if not worth pay, it is not worth hearing."<sup>70</sup>

In addition, there was a widespread belief—or myth—that only the best had survived the test of the paying audience and succeeded in making lecturing their profession. "Hundreds of men have lectured," declared a commentator in *Putnam's Monthly* in 1857, "yet there are but a score or two whose names figure upon the lists of every lyceum, and who are first invited everywhere."<sup>71</sup> Significantly, when he answered his question—"Who are those men, and what does their universal popularity imply?"—he flatly declared that "they are the intellectual leaders of an intelligent progress in the country."<sup>72</sup> They had this standing, which was denied those who confined themselves to the traditional institutions of intellectual leadership, because the lecture system had bestowed it upon them democratically, by popular acclaim. Critics of the system attacked just this insistence that popular taste should confer legitimacy on intellectual endeavor.<sup>73</sup> But defenders argued that only the soundest democratic thought, which was free of partisan and sectarian cant, could pass "the severe test of repeated delivery before lyceum audiences in different parts of the coun-

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 55

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 56. See also Minutes of the Northampton Young Men's Institute (Forbes Library), *Annual Report of the Young Men's Association of Albany* (Albany, 1858), 4–11.

<sup>69</sup> Benjamin to Street, Oct. 26, 1849, Benjamin to President or Secretary of the New Bedford Lyceum, Oct. 18, 1850, Park Benjamin Papers. Benjamin's notice was sent to the *Literary World* and to lyceums all over the northeast.

<sup>70</sup> Hale, *James Russell Lowell*, 110.

<sup>71</sup> "Lectures and Lecturers," 318.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>73</sup> In some senses, "professionalization" was an attempt to escape the dominion of "popularity." See Daniels, *American Science*, 34–62, Haskell, *Emergence of Professional Social Science*, 63–90.

try."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, it was argued, the lecture system was more reliable than pulpit, press, professoriate, or party for establishing what was the appropriate knowledge for the public. "There is no literary tribunal in this country," declared Holland, "that can more readily and justly decide whether a man has anything to say, and can say it well, than a lecture audience." All these facets of the system gave the public lecture its aura as "the most purely democratic of all our democratic institutions."<sup>75</sup>

Finally, the lecture system can be said to have created and embodied an American public. In its organization and structure, in its intellectual form and content, and as a public ritual, it transcended the divisions that fragmented the society and culture. The miscellaneous audience, drawn together in public space to an event under neither sectarian or partisan dominion, was thought to be an embodiment of the entire democratic community. Containing young and old, male and female, Methodist and freethinker, Whig and Democrat, farmer, mechanic, merchant, professional man, and tradesman, the "lecture-room [was] neutral ground upon which all parties and conditions . . . meet."<sup>76</sup> In its substantive form and content, the system also transcended intellectual fragmentation. Men of letters, science, and literature; reformers and conservatives; Unitarians and evangelicals; lawyers, physicians, professors, poets, philosophers, editors, and statesmen—all made their way onto the lecture platform. But they came, for all their diversity, to fashion what one commentator called "a common ground."<sup>77</sup> The rules of the lecture system enforced discourse directed toward the political, moral, and spiritual precepts that transcended sectarian, partisan, and social division. And through its continuing test of popularity, the system was thought to create and embody public opinion—the opinion that the public held in common. In addition, the popular lecture was a ceremony, which in form and content brought the public into self-conscious existence. It was a collective ritual that invoked the values thought to define and sustain the community as a whole.

The lecture system not only objectified local publics; it also created a sense of belonging to a national public. As Higginson explained, the popular lecturer, "moving to and fro [provided] a living shuttle, to weave together this new web of national civilization."<sup>78</sup> By the 1850s audiences across the country had heard the same figures deliver the same lectures. They not only had had a common experience; they were aware that it was common and, indeed, sought it partly because it was common. The professional lecturers were national figures, whose popularity, vouchsafed in invitations to hundreds of towns, had established them as the legitimate spokesmen of what was thought to be the national culture. Thus, the lecture system of the 1850s not only expressed a national culture; it was one of the central institutions within and by which the

<sup>74</sup> "Reviews and Literary Notices," *Atlantic Monthly*, VI (July 1860), 120

<sup>75</sup> Holland, "The Popular Lecture," 365, 363

<sup>76</sup> "Places of Public Amusement," *Putnam's Monthly*, III (Feb 1854), 148–49

<sup>77</sup> "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 24 (Jan 1862), 266

<sup>78</sup> Higginson, "American Lecture System," 49

public had its existence. This public was not, of course, as inclusive as the mythology had it. By the mid-1850s it was almost exclusively a northern public, composed of what could be called the middle classes and overwhelmingly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Though it was believed to be the embodiment of an all-embracing national culture, the public lecture system was in fact an institution for the consolidation of the collective cultural consciousness by which this group came to assert a claim that it was the real American public.